

Johnson's Disclosure of Super-Fast Plane Gives Rise to Many Unanswered Questions

CPYRGHT BY WILLIAM BEECHER

WASHINGTON — President Johnson furnished more questions than answers when he lifted — ever so slightly — the tight security wraps from a super-fast, high-flying new military aircraft, the A-11.

He said the new jet, under development by Lockheed Aircraft Corp. since 1959, far outperforms any other known aircraft. It has flown "in sustained flight at more than 2,000 miles an hour and at altitudes in excess of 70,000 feet."

Mr. Johnson said technological breakthroughs accompanying this achievement would facilitate both military and civilian projects. Specifically, he said extensive tests are under way at Edwards Air Force Base in California to determine the capabilities of the A-11 as a long-range interceptor. And the proposed development of a supersonic commercial transport will be "greatly assisted" by the mastery of such problems as the use of titanium to withstand the terrific heat generated by flight at three times the speed of sound.

Unanswered Questions

But the President's refusal to go beyond his announcement at Saturday's news conference left many questions unanswered.

For instance, why, if we had already successfully flown the A-11, had the five members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff unanimously voted only a few months ago for an immediate start on development of a new interceptor capable of going three times the speed of sound? And why had the House of Representatives only a couple of weeks ago voted a \$40 million authorization for that project, even though not requested by the Administration? Certainly the Joint Chiefs and appropriate members of Congress were kept abreast of the new development.

Perhaps the answer is that the A-11 is the successor to the U-2 spy plane. The U-2, which splashed into public view in 1960 when the Russians downed one carrying Francis Gary Powers on a reconnaissance mission over Soviet territory, is believed to have attained altitudes of up to 90,000 feet. It is relatively slow, however, traveling at well under the speed of sound. The A-11, it is thought, can go at least as high as the U-2 and more than three times faster, improving its chances of survival.

'Potential' Role

This would explain much of the mystery and secrecy surrounding the project. And if the Joint Chiefs were thinking of this as strictly a reconnaissance plane, it's not too difficult to understand their seeking separate development of a Mach 3 interceptor that might be more maneuverable than the stubby-winged, needle-shaped A-11. (Mach 1 equals the speed of sound.)

Although most Government officials have been instructed not to discuss the A-11, one source declared that these aircraft have been flying for "some time" and do have reconnaissance "potential." If such craft have been flying for a long period, it seems more likely that the A-11 is a reconnaissance plane with interceptor "potential."

On a television interview yesterday, Sen. Russell (D., Ga.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said 11 or 12 A-11s are flying. When asked what the planes were doing, Mr. Russell replied "... They are testing. . . . They have been conducting a wide series of tests that will apply not only to interceptor planes but to almost any other kind of planes—reconnaissance, passenger planes, commercial planes."

Asked if his knowledge of the A-11 caused him to leave out of the Senate bill the \$40 million the House had voted for development of a new, separate interceptor, Mr. Russell said it had. "That \$40 million was put in the bill for work on research and development on an improved manned interceptor and here we have got this plane already in the flying stage."

At his news conference, Mr. Johnson said the new tests are to determine the A-11's capabilities as an interceptor, presumably in addition to its other, already tested capabilities. Hughes Aircraft Co., he said, is the developer of the "experimental" fire-control and air-to-air missile systems to be used on the craft. Its J-58 engine was developed by the Pratt & Whitney Aircraft division of United Aircraft Corp., which also developed the U-2's J-57 power plant.

If the A-11 is a sophisticated, updated U-2, it's understandable that the Government might not want to provide the enemy with details of its performance or photos of its likeness. Yet, to a limited extent, that is what has happened. Why?

The President offered this explanation: "The existence of this program is being disclosed to permit the orderly exploitation of this advanced technology in our military and commercial programs."

Firms Already Briefed

Yet a Government source disclosed all major aircraft manufacturers had already been briefed, over the past two months, on the special design features of the A-11 that could have application to such things as development of the supersonic airliner. Many times in the past, industry has been informed of top secret projects to enlist its aid in developing military hardware; public disclosure wouldn't seem to further that end.

However, limited public disclosure might serve to: (1) Increase support for a largely

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Government-financed effort to develop a commercial supersonic transport, and (2) Lessen pressure on the Administration from critics who suggest it is forsaking modern new strategic aircraft entirely in favor of long-range missiles.

Some skepticism already has been voiced in Congress and industry about the wisdom of the Government pushing ahead with the supersonic transport race in competition with similar Russian and British-French efforts. It has been suggested that the projected \$1 billion development cost might prove low and the technical problems nearly insurmountable. The President's disclosure of successful Mach 3 flights demonstrates that although the streamlined A-11 couldn't itself be modified into a bulky passenger plane, the powerplant, metals and design necessary for such speeds have already been mastered.

Study Due Today

The timing of Mr. Johnson's disclosure seems more than coincidental. In fact, he announced Saturday that the White House will release today a long-heralded study of how the Government should proceed with development of the supersonic transport.

The study, prepared by former World Bank president Eugene Black and former Olin Mathieson Chemical Corp. chairman Stanley Osborne, is known to urge that the Government pick up 90% of the development cost instead of the 75% share currently envisaged. It is also known to recommend transfer of the program from the Federal Aviation Agency to a special new agency reporting directly to the President.

The announcement of several sustained flights at Mach 3 or better cannot help but put new steam into the supersonic transport program, which is also aiming for sustained operations at such speeds.

The announcement also may tend to take some of the steam out of criticism that this Administration is betting nearly all its strategic development dollars on missiles to the exclusion of manned aircraft.

Since the A-11 functions best at very high altitudes and because its stubby wings make it unable to fly at treetop level to try to avoid enemy radar, it is unlikely to play any major future role as a missile-packing bomber. But the fact that the Administration hasn't ignored high performance military aircraft for the future may strengthen its hand in arguing against an immediate start on other expensive manned aircraft.

Two-Edged Disclosure

Ironically, a disclosure that might calm some Congressmen on one point might stir them up on another. President Johnson spoke of the "mastery of metallurgy and fabrication of titanium" in producing the A-11. But when Defense Department officials explained their rejection of Boeing Co.'s proposal to build a TFX fighter-bomber, they said the company's plan to use this metal involved too many development risks. The TFX contract, which might ultimately run to \$6.5 billion, went to General Dynamics Corp. in association with Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corp.

A Government source tried to forestall a dispute on this issue by suggesting that it was because of their familiarity with titanium's use in the A-11 that top Pentagon officials were in a position to turn down Boeing's specifics in the TFX plane.

But there was some evidence over the weekend that this explanation wouldn't satisfy everyone. Sen. McClellan (D., Ark.), who has chaired a Congressional investigation of the TFX award, said the successful use of titanium in the A-11 "comes as no surprise at all." In fact, he said, "Pentagon officials who rejected titanium in the Boeing design will soon approve and order its use by General Dynamics in the TFX plane."

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